International Forum of Educational Technology & Society

Formal Discussion Initiation

Participation in on-line courses – how essential is it?

(Participation in the discussion requires free membership of the forum.)

http://ifets.ieee.org/discussions/discuss_january2004.html

Time schedule:

Discussion: January 19-28, 2004

Summing-up: January 29-30, 2004

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Introduction

Groups of learners on online courses, in common with other online communities, are generally found to comprise both highly participative individuals and those who appear to contribute little to group discussions but who consider that they are actively following the course and learning. I use the neutral term ROPs (Read Only Participants) for the latter rather than the commonly used "lurker" which carries a suggestion of deviant behaviour.

The questions to be addressed in this discussion are to do with issues such as if ROPs on an online course are pursuing an inappropriate learning strategy on their part and, if so, what could be done by course designers and moderators to encourage learner participation.

Participation and collaborative learning

Question 1: What type of online course benefits most from a participation-rich approach or when should ROPing be discouraged?

Discussion and sharing experience have been identified as two of the most effective means by which adults learn (Brookfield, 1990; Brown and Duguid, 2000). But there is a

difference between, for example, a course in a computer programming language and one in educational theory, the former arguably functioning satisfactorily with a course design based around an individual learner interacting with tutor and course material and moving through the course at their own pace whereas the latter would benefit more from a high degree of collaborative discussion and groupwork (with the implied logistical implications of a group of learners following the course in cohort).

But what about the (indignant) participant who says "I am participating even if I am not involved in discussion"? The existence of a variety of learning styles is now widely accepted and the inherent flexibility of online learning allows us to consider ways of catering for these. Should we then accept that "some people are like that" and accept this as a valid learning style/strategy.

John Seely Brown of PARC Xerox (Schrage 2002) has applied the idea of the legitimate peripheral participant (LPP) originally used by Lave and Wenger (1990) in the broader context of situated learning, to the situation of online learning communities and sees it as having positive aspects:

> "The culture of the Internet allows you to link, lurk, and learn. Once you lurk you can pick up the genre of that community, and you can move from the periphery to the center safely asking a question - sometimes more safely virtually than physically - and then back out again. It has provided a platform for perhaps the most successful form of learning that civilization has ever seen. We may now be in a position to really leverage the community mind".

However, a question then follows about the value of legitimate peripheral participation for those people who are actively involved in the discussion. In a recent CPsquare project entitled "Let's get more positive about the term lurker" (CPsquare Lurker Project 2003) this phenomenon was discussed in some detail from a Communities of Practice (CoP) perspective. They conclude that "(…) it is valid for participants to interact at different levels, depending on the context of the CoP (or discussion) and their learning needs. However, concern was expressed that while non contributors may be meeting **their** learning needs, the wider group needs active participants to 'value add' for all members in order to support the long term sustainability of the community. It was

suggested that expected roles and contribution levels be discussed in the initial stages of the CoP, and renegotiated during the life of the CoP."

Measurement

Learner assessment and course evaluation

Question 2: What sort of participation profiling features should we be looking for in online learning environments?

One of the great benefits of working online is that it is possible to keep track of learner and tutor written contributions. Most Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) will allow tutors to keep track of how many messages are posted by each student per week and it is often possible to extract further information such as whether the post was initiating a thread or responding to a previous post.

In a small study on a 20 week online course I recorded the number of posts/week per learner and classified the posts into 3 groups:

Group One initiated task-related discussion

Group Two responded to task-related messages

Group Three were non-task-related messages and replies

From this I went on to chart (using Excel) the participation profile of each learner and made some tentative conclusions about both the involvement of individuals throughout an extended course and also as to the type of activities/tasks that elicited a high degree of participation from learners.

David Wiley (Wiley 2002) has proposed a more detailed mathematical approach to evaluating participation in multi-thread discussion by operationalizing the discussion and calculating an *adjusted mean reply depth* (d) for each participant where d could have the following values:

d value, possible interpretation:

0 to 0.3 Monologue or lecture; no discussion

0.3 to 1.2 Simple Q & A; chit-chat

1.2 and higher Discussion, Multilogue

Wiley's approach could be applied in software environments that allow discussion threading (this was not possible in First Class in 2002 when I was doing the study mentioned above). I believe both approaches can be fairly time consuming and extracting and processing this information for large numbers of learners is a non-trivial task in many VLEs.

Question 3: Should learner participation be assessed by the awarding of grades?

This is something of a thorny question and I suspect there is no one answer. On the one hand, if we are convinced that collaboration is an integral part of the learning process on a particular course, then one way of giving learners an incentive to participate is by grading it. Furthermore, if we as tutors see particular learners actively sharing ideas and knowledge, researching, reflecting and evolving while others remain stubbornly silent it seems to make sense to reflect this in the final assessment grade. Indeed, there is evidence from work by the Suny Learning Network that learners welcome this (Swan et al, 2003)

However measuring this in a transparent way is not easy and the process is also likely to encourage some course participants to post messages simply to maintain their posting averages thus leading to a worse signal/noise ratio and lowering the quality of collaboration.

At the same time, it could be argued that if we believe the kind of active learner involvement described above promotes learning, then perhaps it makes more sense to concentrate on developing more precise learning assessment tools (portfolio, weekly reflection statements, theme papers) rather than grading participation itself i.e. aim to evaluate the outcome rather than the process.

Factors affecting participation

Question 4: What factors contribute to increasing and enhancing learner participation?

The Suny paper mentioned above (Swan et al, 2003) asserts that:

> "The findings of the research on computer-mediated communication and
> asynchronous online learning are quite consistent. They point to three
> (and only three) course design factors that contribute significantly to the
> success of online courses. These are a transparent interface, an instructor
> who interacts frequently and constructively with students, and a valued
> and dynamic discussion."

Putting aside for the moment the question of defining the success of online courses, would we agree that these are the key design factors? If so, what sort of characteristics of the interface, instructor and discussion do we need to be thinking about/promoting? My own opinion, influenced by unpublished work in progress, is that the key to optimizing collaborative learning online lies in the learning tasks provided. Of course the moderator has to possess the necessary competencies (Salmon 2000) and the virtual environment must be designed around on an appropriate pedagogical model, but it is the design and organization of the learning tasks which is the essential ingredient in facilitating the sort of active or engaged learning we have debated at some length on this forum in the past (IFETS 2001).

Ludic participation

Question 5: Are ludic areas just a nice design extra or do they play a role in getting learners involved and participating in online environments?

Finally, moving to more specific aspects of learning environments I would like to refer to an area I believe deserves more attention - the role of virtual "student bars", homesteads etc. which are found built into VLEs and learning platforms.

Personally, as a student on online courses, I have found that the idea of "dropping in" to a virtual bar/canteen to have a moan or share a joke and having my own "room" to

decorate as I wish and invite visitors to, all go towards enhancing the feeling of individuality and of belonging to a community. This can make the virtual student experience a richer one and certainly helped me to log on regularly and to keep up my involvement with the course. On the other hand, fellow participants who "have not bothered" with these optional aspects appeared to successfully complete their courses and be satisfied with their learning achievements. I am not aware of research into this particular aspect.

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